

# Full speech to the Knesset

Jerusalem -  
Wednesday 15/06/2011

Dear Mr Speaker

Honourable Members of the Knesset,

Distinguished Guests,

It is a profound honour for me to address the Knesset today. I am here as President of the European Parliament, the only supranational assembly in the world to be directly elected, representing almost 500 million citizens from 27 Member States.

I am standing here to deliver an unequivocal message of sympathy and solidarity to your people: Israel has a fundamental right to exist. Israel has a lasting right to live peacefully within secure borders among neighbours who recognise it. Whenever this right is questioned, or denied, the European Union will stand firmly by Israel's side, without hesitation.

But I am also addressing you as a citizen and a former Prime minister of Poland, a country which has strong bonds with the State of Israel and shares many of its legitimate concerns. Jewish Poles who came here contributed to the emergence of this homeland. In that regard, the history of the foundation of your state is also the history of my country. If I addressed this House 60 years ago, most of its members would not need interpretation.

Remembering the lessons of Auschwitz

Dear Colleagues,

Yesterday, for the second time in my life, I visited Yad Vashem. I felt the same emotions as when I walked from Auschwitz to Birkenau with Prime Minister Netanyahu thirteen years ago in "the March of the Living". It was the first time two Prime Ministers walked this path of remembrance.

I have been personally engaged for many years in preserving the memory of the tragedy of Auschwitz. I can say that I was raised in the shadow of Auschwitz. I was born several kilometres from it, in occupied Poland, in 1940. On my first school trip, I visited Auschwitz. The memory of the shock after having seen in the camp, a child's memory, has remained with me throughout all of my life. The government of which I was the Prime Minister created a protection zone around this German Nazi concentration and death camp. It also initiated the Strategic Government Programme to ensure proper places for worship to commemorate the mass extermination of Jews, but also Poles, Russians and others.

We also launched the International Education Centre in Oswiecim, an initiative that goes beyond the Holocaust addressing the issue of protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms. Last year, together with many Members of the European Parliament, I was present at the commemoration of the 65th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz camp. There,

we signed a declaration on the defence of human rights in Oswiecim. I am personally committed to this fight. There is no better place in the world to honour and remember the fundamental human values - at a place where those fundamental values were violated in the most drastic way, most drastic in the history of all human kind.

The uniqueness of the Shoah is unquestioned. And let me be clear, political leaders and all those who continue to deny the Holocaust will never be accepted in the community of civilised nations. Because the Holocaust is not only a European tragedy; it is a stain on the history of mankind.

The very significance of remembrance lies precisely in our personal and collective responsibility to make sure that a similar tragedy will never happen again. But, the fight against anti-Semitism should not be seen only as the fight for a specific group of people or countries. It is the fight for all mankind, shared by all of us as human beings regardless of our national, political, cultural, ethnic and religious background.

That's why, we Europeans - and I mean also you, Members of Knesset - should ensure that the lessons of the Holocaust provide a collective legacy for all communities and minorities living together. But our credibility depends on our fighting against racism, xenophobia and all forms of discrimination and prejudices based on the fear of the "other".

The battle for human dignity is indivisible. It is valid for any country, any people, and any time. Winning this battle offers an opportunity to overcome prejudices, often - regrettably - hatred towards neighbours. It offers a chance for reconciliation and ending the conflicts. Our planet is too small, there are too many of us, to allow ourselves to despise and reject each other.

Changes in the region: an opportunity for achieving peace and lasting stability

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Israel's history is part of Europe's history and our fates are intertwined. As democracies we are part of the same community of values. You are our neighbours, we have a common heritage. Cyprus is only 180 nautical miles from Israel. Our common heritage and ideals should be at the core of our common action to inspire hope, and to respond to the aspirations of the peoples for democracy in an ever changing Middle East.

We Europeans understand Israel's concerns about the changes currently happening in the Arab world, especially on your security. But those events may also be the opportunity which has eluded us for so many years. Stability is necessary, but today we are learning that true stability comes only through democracy, shared participation and shared responsibility of the citizens.

These changes which we are witnessing, also call for a change in our mindset. As Europeans we used to deal only with governments, whatever the nature of their regime. Now, the changes across the Arab world require a new approach where we should recognize the importance of governments as well as people. The latter are more important. We can no longer pay attention to the stability of nations at the expense of the fundamental rights of individuals.

The European Parliament will continue to show a strong commitment to universal values. Today, our duty is to protect democracy and safeguard civilian lives whenever their

governments use violence to prevent them from fulfilling citizens' aspirations. I strongly believe that this "second national independence" in the Arab world, will bring about the blessings of democracy. Bring democracy to the region, in which you, citizens of Israel, live. You have the chance to be an agent of change. I am sure that your nation, a nation of hope and freedom like Israel will contribute to writing this new chapter in the history of the Middle East.

This requires difficult decisions, looking also back at your past, it requires openness towards others, imagination, ability to put yourself in the position of your neighbours. As the Bible says - "God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

I do not want to lecture the representatives of a nation so tried by the past, and so great through its history. Free nations chose their own path. I am only speaking based on European, Polish and finally personal experience. It was the path of solidarity of people, mutual respect and trust, brought an end to European hatred, allowed for talks, dialogue and negotiations to supersede war. Democratic principles, giving the citizens the right to co-decision had fundamental significance.

You are an extension of Europe, its part. I believe that also here, European solutions are possible, bringing respect, recognition and unequivocal support of the international community for decades. Achieving peace between Israel and the Palestinians is the most pressing challenge today. Over many decades, this conflict has been used by Arab regimes as an excuse to not implement political reforms. Recent events in Tunisia, Egypt and other countries of the region have shown the determination of the peoples to defend their legitimate aspirations to enjoy freedom and achieve social justice.

This extraordinary time requires extraordinary, decisive action. The right of Israeli citizens for security and those of the Palestinians for statehood are clear. Lack of decisive actions will however put governments under serious challenges of unfulfilled expectations of the citizens. Genuine negotiations are necessary to achieve lasting peace.

Dear Colleagues,

The need for progress on the Middle East peace process is more urgent than ever. Nobody can afford the status quo. For Israel, continuing to live with the fear of Kassam rockets fired on its population is not sustainable. Citizens of Sderot can not live in fear of an attack. Not to mention the constant insecurity of being surrounded by hostile neighbours. For Palestinians, the "Arab spring" could increase frustration not only against the occupation, but also against a divided Palestinian leadership. The only way forward is for Israel and the Palestinians to engage in direct negotiations that will lead to a two-state solution, two states living side by side in peace, security and mutual recognition.

Since the Declaration of Venice in 1980, the European Union shared the fundamental goal of a just and lasting resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After more than thirty years, the international support for this vision has never been so strong. We in the European Parliament welcomed President's Obama speech on May 19, 2011, in which he offered his proposals for the resumption of negotiations based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed land swaps.

I strongly believe that there is no real alternative other than a comprehensive peace based on direct negotiations without pre-conditions. For the EU, peace must be achieved on the basis of the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions, the Madrid principles including land for peace, the Roadmap, the agreements previously reached by the parties and the Arab Peace Initiative.

It will take time. It will take patience. This time the negotiations must come to a success. I always remember a Yiddish proverb: *kroke iz nit in ejn tog gebojt geworn* - all we need is good will on both sides.

Our bilateral relationship

Dear Colleagues,

Israel's cooperation in achieving such a common goal for the region is indispensable for its security. It will also be beneficial for a significant re-launch and deepening of the partnership between the European Union and Israel.

Some initiatives have already been taken to foreshadow this path. Israel has been involved in the 7th Framework Programme for Research and Development, which I had the honour to be the rapporteur of, from the beginning. In this area, we can say that Israel is a full member of the European Union.

Earlier this morning I had a good exchange of views with a group of students at the Hebrew University. The perception that young Israelis and young Europeans have of each other will determine the future of our relations. As politicians, it is our duty to encourage positive mutual perception.

Each year the European Parliament invites promising young political leaders: Israelis, Palestinian and Europeans to a three-day seminar to debate our common future. It is notable to see them change their perceptions of each other, to begin understanding the arguments of others.

It is a drop in the sea, but a successful one. Because you are a vital part of our neighbourhood. Our bilateral cooperation covers a broad range of sectors, from democracy and human rights to transport, energy and technology, not to mention combating anti-Semitism and fighting against racism and xenophobia. But, the strong partnership between the European Union and Israel might not fulfil its promise if it misses its regional dimension and its final goal.

The vision that was embodied by the Barcelona Process, sixteen years ago, has become more relevant than ever. A community of shared values and a common future between democratic states is within reach.

It is time to revive the Mediterranean dream to bring together Israel and its Arab neighbours. The Mediterranean is after all a "*mare nostrum*", for all of us.

We, Parliamentarians from both shores of this inner sea, have a historic opportunity to bridge the gap between societies. In the past, we were not effective, and even made mistakes. The Euro-Mediterranean Partnership gave little room for real dialogue between civil societies. We did not listen carefully enough to the voices calling for change. Still, I am convinced that we

can create a sense of community and solidarity between peoples. Because lasting peace is not about peace between governments, but between peoples.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I already mentioned, the story of the European Union provides hope. The notion of reconciliation between nations was at the origin of our common European journey. This notion must have relevance to other regions in trouble.

Without France and Germany overcoming their divisions of the past, there would be no European Union. Without Poland and Germany reconciling their past, there would be no reunification of our continent. Without Israeli and Palestinian peace, there will not be peace in the region.

Such is our European, but also my personal experience. Until today, despite of having headed a government in Poland, and now the European Parliament, the most significant experience of my political life remain the experience of "Solidarity". The setting up of a free, independent trade union in my place of work, chairing the first national "Solidarity" Congress in 1981. Engaging in the underground activities, and then creating a new post-1989 reality, also as head of "Solidarity" government. It was the peaceful struggle through negotiations, and then the difficult reconciliation, which were the fundamentals of "Solidarity's" experience. In a more international dimension, a symbol of post-World War II reconciliation came with the words of a letter addressed by Polish bishops to German bishops: "we forgive and ask for forgiveness".

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the Ecclesiastes says:

"There is a time for everything,

A time to love and a time to hate,

A time for war and a time for peace".

We have experienced the time of hate and war,

It is time for peace!

Shalom! Salam!

President of the European Parliament

Jerzy Buzek